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Book review

CEMENT SHOES BY JUDY IRELAND
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When the speaker of the opening poem, “Growing Girls in Iowa,” asserts midway through the poem, “No matter how they tried, we grew up wild, / big-eyed and defiant, burned by the sun” (Lines 8-9), the underlying premise of Judy Ireland’s Cement Shoes is revealed to be that of disobedience and motion. Winner of the 2013 Sinclair Poetry Prize, Cement Shoes, Ireland’s first published full-length collection of poetry, is composed of a wealth of narrative vignettes that act as reflections on the experiences of the poet, beginning with her childhood in Iowa and moving through her adult life in Florida.

In the collection’s first section, “Cement Shoes,” Ireland allows the reader access into her idyllic, and sometimes painful, memories of growing up in Iowa, and then eventually into her life as a young woman. The constructed personal history in the first few poems of this section, by way of rhythmic free-verse stanzas, gives the reader a sense of loneliness but also affirms the Midwestern value system in which the poet was raised. These poems are most compelling, however, because Ireland’s language makes these scenes feel familiar, but these same scenes plant the seeds that the poet will harvest in later poems. For instance, in the poem “Cement Shoes,” while riding with her brother on his motorcycle as a teenager, the speaker reflects:

I didn’t lean sideways because I was
different, my soul, was wearing cement shoes,
and I didn’t care that I would never marry.
But why couldn’t I do all the rest
and still be different [...] (Lines 50-54)

While the collection certainly begins with highly vivid imagery of Iowa farmlands described as “yellow and green cornstalks,” “red tractors,” “black soil,” and dirt roads (something akin to Carl Sandburg’s rural Illinois or Willa Cather’s Nebraska), something significant occurs here. This interrogative voice begins a shift into poems no longer concerned with the poet’s past but, rather, with her present and, more importantly, with her agency and exploration of an identity imprinted but not defined by the Iowa landscape. Layers of depth begin to appear and the reader discovers—with poems like “Lovers’ Conversation,” “Your Complicated Eyes (For Evette),” and “Thoughts on Gay Marriage, while Visiting My Lover’s Parents—the reason the speaker earlier believed she would never get married. This section slowly becomes a meditation in identity construction and self-acceptance, but the poet is wise to stop just short of falling into a didactic voice that might diminish the power of her intimate lines.

The second and final section of Cement Shoes, titled “Walking Catfish,” begins drastically differently than its predecessor, most notably in voice and purpose. These eighteen poems are not gestures into the poet’s childhood and relationships, nor are they acquired wisdom. This section opens with the jarring poem “My Pillow, A Stone,” which features a speaker who ruminates on the possibility of becoming a woman who would die alone and be found by her mail carrier days later. Next, the eponymous “Walking Catfish” details the speaker’s encounter with a type of fish that has the ability to move on land from
one body of water to another. This image becomes a driving metaphor for this section's themes when the speaker explains that, in the Midwest, farmers “[...] put fences around their ponds / to protect their fish who cannot walk, / who must swim endlessly / around and around” (Lines 14-17).

This section’s resonance to the “Cement Shoes” section becomes clear when considering that, in many ways, both sections are essentially poems about identity, loneliness, and being an outcast. However, there’s something different at play in this second section. The use of voice in these poems is more mature and, in some instances, detached or apathetic. This works well when balanced with the occasional humorous poem, such as “To the Lady Who Wrote a Letter to the Editor Asking for No Sex in Future Issues of the Magazine Because It Interferes with Spirituality,” in which the speaker explicitly describes how the conception of the aforementioned “lady” must have gone down. Instead of continuing in the vein of the previous section and displaying moments of her younger life, Ireland features even more introspective poems such as “Awake at Night,” “Thoughts on a Plane,” “Farm Woman with Shotgun,” and “Burning Cane.” These poems reflect not only on who she has been but also on who she has not been and who she will never be. The reader is led on a journey through Cement Shoes to the collection’s final haunting piece. “Earth Ground” closes with the image of land meeting water: an underplayed meditation on the inevitable, but natural, process of death.

While sometimes bright and beautiful, sometimes dark and brooding, the real strength of Cement Shoes is that the poems cover a variety of situations and emotional spectrums that thematically echo throughout and conclude somewhere different than where they began. Still, the poems never lose the innate sense of casual intimacy. Naturally, because of how the collection is put together, a connection, as well as an intended narrative arc, is implied. However, many if not most of these poems are strong enough to stand on their own. This individuality of Ireland’s poems makes it no surprise that, in the acknowledgments, we discover that twenty-three of the forty-two poems in Cement Shoes have been previously published in journals.

In the end, what makes Cement Shoes stand out in contemporary poetry is that Ireland could have overplayed her hand and offered the reader sentimental exploitations of her own internal conflicts (as poets sometimes make the mistake of doing when self-reflecting). Instead, Ireland chooses to tuck her warm moments of recollection and desire among her cooler moments of vulnerability, and she remains willing to inquire into the depths of human nature as a whole.